

# The Charge

Over her lifetime in the community, each sister held a remarkable variety of jobs, or “charges.” The tasks assigned to novices were changed frequently to familiarize them with the chores associated with household management. The *Constitutions* outlined the tasks associated with specific charges, such as the portress, sacristan, librarian, linen keeper, cook, refectorian, steward, and infirmarian. Although the auxiliary sisters assumed much of the manual labor, choir sisters shared in the everyday chores such as cleaning and sewing. In keeping with the vow of obedience, each member of the congregation was to accept difficult or tedious tasks with a cheerful spirit. Even the most mundane job was to be completed with the goal of perfection in mind.

*The sisters who teach, whether in boarding or day schools, shall willingly bear a share in the manual labor necessary to the upkeep of the religious houses to which they are assigned.*

— Book of Customs, 1939

Sisters employed creative methods to accomplish the long list of chores for which they were responsible. Laundry was a massive undertaking at convents and large houses and required the combined efforts of a number of sisters. Some approached the task as a game, racing to see who could work the fastest. Others resorted to diversionary tactics to take their minds off the job. Sisters composed stories, poetry, and, in one instance, an original screenplay as they tackled the piles of clothing and linens. For some, the feeling of satisfaction that resulted from a job well done was the only incentive required.



Sisters Mary Lillian Gagner and Marian Theresa Mullen work in the garden at Holy Rosary Convent, Pomeroy, Washington, 1946



Postulants and sisters work together in the Convent of the Holy Names diet kitchen, Marylhurst, 1956

*I can remember the laundry so well. We were so naïve as novices, we thought it was wonderful! We had a contest to see who could be the fastest, who could fold the most sheets in a time. We tried to beat the next group coming in. And the sheets would be so hot. I can still remember.*

— S. Barbara Collier

The large amount of work involved in managing large households reinforced the importance of community. When deadlines loomed, every sister pitched in to accomplish the task at hand. During harvest season, sisters were given enormous supplies of ripe fruit on the verge of spoiling. “Canning parties” required the



In the Marylhurst laundry building, Christie School sisters band together to finish the ironing, 1953



Novices concentrate on their sewing, Convent of the Holy Names, Marylhurst, c.1955

assistance of every sister, many of whom worked well into the night after a long day of teaching. Other chores required a certain level of skill. Sisters who had yet to perfect the art of ironing the coif or mending the holy habit sought help from others. If a sister was named for a job and was truly unequal to the task, another member of the congregation offered to trade responsibilities. As in many other aspects of religious life, the combined strengths and talents of the community carried them through even the most difficult labors.

*The collars, bandeaus, and coifs had to be ironed. You had to be good [at ironing] to get the coifs and if you got them you had them for life! In Seattle, Sister used to say, “Come early!” I’d say, “Sister, I do thirteen caps in an hour.” She’d say, “That’s why I want you early. You can do more!”*

— S. Francella Griggs

*When you’re named for a job, you accept it as God’s will, confident He’ll carry you through.*

— S. Bea Weisner

*We sewed and we mended and we ironed. We did a lot of manual labor. I learned to run a big floor polisher with one hand which I’d never done at home. My mother couldn’t believe it! Everything had to be perfect.*

— S. Barbara Carroll



Sister Anne Eileen Connors sews, Novitiate and College of the Holy Names, Albany, 1964

Novices enjoy a moment of levity as they work in the kitchen, Novitiate and College of the Holy Names, Albany, 1964



Sister Bernadette Alice Roberts prepares the altar bread, Academy of the Holy Names, Tampa, c.1955

Sisters at Sacred Heart Convent prepare to tackle the day’s chores, Spokane, 1952

